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FOR NEA/ARPI, INL/HSTC AND G/TIP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/14/2016

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SUBJECT: MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS MINISTER, AN EXPERIENCED  
TECHNOCRAT, SUCCEEDS CONTROVERSIAL SALAFI

REF: KUWAIT 475

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Matt Tueller for reason 1.4(d).

11. (C) The Ambassador met with the new State Minister for Municipal Affairs, Abdullah Al-Muhailbi, on February 14 to congratulate him on his new post and to ask about the Minister's plans. The Minister said that he had worked his way up through the ranks in the Municipality, and had served since 1982. In response to the Ambassador's question about why the previous Municipal Affairs Minister, Salafi MP Ahmad Baqr, had caused so much controversy, Al-Muhailbi said it was because he was overwhelmed due to his unfamiliarity with the Ministry. He also conjectured that Baqr was very cautious so as not to open himself up to a "grilling" by the National Assembly. (Note: Baqr was subjected to scathing criticism during his tenure. His defenders, including many liberals, said the criticism was due to his efforts to reform the Municipality and reduce corruption. Post knows of one case where he blocked the licensing of a Christian school without explanation, though his Salafi leanings might have something to do with it. End Note.) Al-Muhailbi said relations with the Municipal Council were good. (Note: The Municipal Council approves projects, which then need to be certified by the Minister. Disputes are subject to adjudication by the Council of Ministers. End Note.)

12. (C) The Ambassador also encouraged the new Minister to support the establishment of a center for domestic laborers. The Minister acknowledged the problem of expatriate labor in Kuwait, and the necessity of Kuwait implementing its laws and protecting the rights of all residents. Al-Muhailbi made no specific commitments, and the Ambassador expressed his interest in pursuing the matter in the future.

13. (C) Comment: The Municipal Council has blocked or delayed at least two Church projects, Shi'a mosque construction projects, and the establishment of a national center for domestic laborers by the Kuwait Union of Domestic Labor Offices. It has impeded these projects through a combination of bureaucratic stalling and restricting of access to land. If Al-Muhailbi is less reticent than his predecessor and if, as an insider, he is better able to manage the agency, change may be forthcoming. End Comment.

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LeBaron